

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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C O N F I D E N T I A L COLOMBO 0387

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: ELAB, PINT, CE
SUBJECT: AAFLI ACTIVITIES DURING UPCOMING ELECTION CAMPAIGN

REF (A) COLOMBO 1094, (B) COLOMBO 0315

1. SUMMARY. WITH ELECTIONS IN SRI LANKA EXPECTED TO BE HELD SOMETIME BETWEEN NOW AND SEPTEMBER 22, THE EMBASSY IS CONSIDERING STEPS TO AVOID ANY SUGGESTION THAT THE USG IS SOMEHOW INTERFERING IN DOMESTIC POLITICS. GIVEN THE ESSENTIALLY POLITICAL CHARACTER OF THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT AND THE OPPOSITION NATURE OF THE INDEPENDENT UNIONS WITH WHICH THE ASIAN-AMERICAN FREE LABOR INSTITUTE (AAFLI) WORKS, IT IS THE EMBASSY'S SUGGESTION THAT AAFLI SUSPEND ITS PROGRAM HERE UNTIL AFTER ELECTIONS ARE HELD. AAFLI REPRESENTATIVE'S NEXT SCHEDULED VISIT, LATER THIS MONTH, SHOULD POSE NO PROBLEMS, BUT WE SUGGEST THAT THE SUSPENSION BEGIN THEREAFTER. END SUMMARY.

2. ELECTIONS ARE SCHEDULED TO BE HELD IN SRI LANKA AT SOME AS YET UNANNOUNCED DATE BEFORE SEPTEMBER 22. THE PRIME MINISTER MIGHT NOT SET THE DATE UNTIL THE STATUTORY DEADLINE FOR DISSOLUTION OF THE NATIONAL STATE ASSEMBLY MAY 22, BUT SHE COULD CALL AN ELECTION ANYTIME. IN ANTICIPATION OF THESE ELECTIONS, CONFIDENTIAL

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THE EMBASSY HAS BEEN CONSIDERING THEIR POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES TO THE US INTEREST. ONE POTENTIAL BY-PRODUCT OF AN ELECTION CAMPAIGN IS ANTI-AMERICAN CHARGES.

3. IN THE PAST THE US HAS BEEN THE TARGET OF POLITICAL ATTACK BY VARIOUS ELEMENTS OF THE SRI LANKA POLITICAL SCENE, USUALLY LEFTIST. IT IS VERY MUCH IN OUR INTEREST

THAT THERE BE NO OPPORTUNITY FOR MISUNDERSTANDING OR MISREPRESENTATION OF US ACTIVITY IN SRI LANKA AS THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN BEGINS TO HEAT UP. THE EMBASSY INTENDS TO DO ITS BEST TO AVOID ANY ACTIVITY THAT MIGHT BE MISCONSTRUED AS INTERFERENCE IN DOMESTIC POLITICS. WE ARE MAKING A SIMILAR REQUEST OF US-SPONSORED OR SUPPORTED ACTIVITIES IN SRI LANKA. IN LINE WITH THIS, THE EMBASSY SUGGESTS THAT AAFLI BE APPROACHED WITH THE SUGGESTION THAT IT SUSPEND ITS PROGRAM HERE UNTIL ELECTIONS ARE OVER.

4. THE LABOR MOVEMENT IN SRI LANKA HAS ALWAYS BEEN ESSENTIALLY POLITICAL. ALL THE PARTIES HAVE THEIR LABOR AUXILIARIES WHICH PARTICIPATE IN ELECTION CAMPAIGNS. ALTHOUGH THE UNIONS WITH WHICH AAFLI WORKS ARE ESSENTIALLY INDEPENDENT IN A TRADE UNION SENSE, SOME ARE LINKED IN THE PUBLIC MIND WITH THE OPPOSITION UNITED NATIONAL PARTY. AS THE CAMPAIGN BEGINS IN EARNEST, THEY ARE LIKELY TO BE DRAWN INTO THE FRAY, EITHER VOLUNTARILY OR OTHERWISE. IF AAFLI SHOULD BE RUNNING SEMINARS WITH SUCH UNIONS AT THAT TIME, THE POSSIBILITIES FOR MISREPRESENTATION ARE OBVIOUS.

5. THE RECENT SERIES OF STRIKES (REF A) HAS DEMONSTRATED THE

POTENTIAL POLITICAL DYNAMITE IN THE LABOR ISSUE. THE STRIKE BY RAILWAY WORKERS FOR AN ENHANCED END-OF-YEAR SALARY ADVANCE QUICKLY ESCALATED INTO A GOVERNMENT-LABOR CONFRONTATION IN WHICH THE OPPOSITION PARTIES

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LINED UP WITH THE TRADE UNIONS TO ATTEMPT TO DEFY THE GOVERNMENT'S BACK-TO-WORK ORDER. WHEN THE STRIKE ENDED, THE PRIME MINISTER'S FIRST PUBLIC COMMENT ON THE ISSUES INCLUDED THE OBSERVATION THAT SHE SUSPECTED FOREIGN INTERFERENCE (REF B). SHE BACKED DOWN THE NEXT DAY ON THAT CHARGE, BUT NOT BEFORE GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION MEDIA HAD JUMPED ON IT WITH ALACRITY.

6. AAFLI'S PROGRAMS IN SRI LANKA HAVE BEEN CARRIED ON WITH A COMMENDABLE CONCERN FOR THE POLITICAL PITFALLS INHERENT IN LOCAL LABOR MATTERS. HOWEVER, SINCE AAFLI ATTEMPTS TO PLAY A BASICALLY COORDINATING AND FINANCING ROLE, LEAVING THE EXECUTION OF SEMINARS, ETC. TO THE LOCAL UNION LEADERS, THERE IS POTENTIAL FOR SUCH ACTIVITIES TO GO IN DIRECTIONS NOT INTENDED BY AAFLI. A CASE IN POINT WAS A RECENT AAFLI-SPONSORED SEMINAR WITH AN INDEPENDENT PORT WORKERS UNION; ONE INVITED SPEAKER, A REPRESENTATIVE OF ANOTHER AAFLI-AFFILIATED UNION, LAUNCHED INTO AN UNEXPECTED DIATRIBE

AGAINST THE STATE OF EMERGENCY AND THE PRIME MINISTER, AS THE LABATT AND AAFLI REPRESENTATIVE SQUIRMED IN THEIR SEATS. SUCH AN INCIDENT IS RARE, BUT THE POTENTIAL FOR MISUNDERSTANDING IS INCREASINGLY THERE AS THE CAMPAIGN HEATS UP.

7. SINCE THE ELECTION DATE HAS NOT YET BEEN ANNOUNCED, AAFLI MAY SUGGEST POSTPONING ANY DECISION ON "LOWERING ITS PROFILE" THIS YEAR. HOWEVER, AAFLI IS ALREADY SETTING ITS PROGRAM FOR THE YEAR AND HAS ASKED ITS UNION CONTACTS TO BEGIN PLANNING FOR SEMINARS DURING SCHEDULED VISITS OF ITS REPRESENTATIVES. IT MIGHT PROVE DIFFICULT AND EMBARRASSING TO HAVE TO BACK OUT OF SUCH COMMITMENTS LATER. THE EMBASSY IS EXPECTING AAFLI REP GARZA IN MID-FEBRUARY, WHICH SHOULD NOT POSE ANY PROBLEMS, BARRING AN UNLIKELY ANNOUNCEMENT OF SNAP ELECTIONS. HOWEVER, WE WOULD SUGGEST THAT AAFLI MAKE CONFIDENTIAL

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NO FURTHER DEFINITE PLANS FOR VISITS HERE UNTIL AFTER SEPTEMBER.

8. LABATT HAS DISCUSSED WITH AAFLI REP MANN THE EMBASSY'S CONCERNS ABOUT THE PERIOD BEFORE AND DURING AN ELECTION CAMPAIGN. LABATT POINTED OUT THAT IT WAS IN AAFLI'S LONG-TERM INTEREST TO AVOID BEING DRAWN INTO DOMESTIC POLITICAL DEBATE HERE. IF AAFLI'S WORK IN THE SRI LANKA LABOR MOVEMENT WAS MISCONSTRUED PUBLICLY DURING THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN, V T MIGHT FIND ITSELF UNWELCOME HERE NO MATTER WHAT GOVERNMENT COMES TO POWER. ONE HAS BUT TO RECALL THE FATE OF THE ASIA FOUNDATION IN SRI LANKA.
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